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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Chinese self-deprecation phenomenon from a sociopragmatic perspective, analyzing the ritual and pragmatic implications that arise from face-work sought to fulfill the face needs of interlocutors in communicative events. It defines self-deprecation as the act of ritual or purposeful disparaging of one's own prestige, achievements, or competence in order to achieve desired contextual effects through oral or written forms of communication. The paper notes that previous research on pragmatics and social interaction has concentrated solely on either the normative or instrumental functions of self-deprecation, asserting that these two lines of inquiry cannot be separated from one another if the social, cultural, and historical contexts are considered. It suggests that self-deprecation is best treated as a construct responsive to social sanctions, psychological needs, and communicative goals. An alternative interpretation is proposed to make the universal model of face more compatible with the language- and culture-specific characteristics of Chinese. The paper suggests that understanding the self-deprecation phenomenon provides better understanding of the importance of face in learning and instruction, especially for adolescents and adults. (SM)

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Self-deprecation Phenomena in Chinese Face-work: Ritual and Pragmatic Implications

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This paper examines the self-deprecation phenomena in the Chinese cultural milieu from a sociopragmatic perspective, with a focus on the analysis of the ritual and pragmatic implications that arise from face-work sought to fulfill the face needs of the interlocutors in communicative events. In the current exploration, self-deprecation is broadly defined as the act of ritual or purposeful disparaging of one's own prestige, achievements and/or competence in order to achieve desired contextual effects through oral or written forms of communication. Given that previous research on pragmatics and social interaction has been concentrated exclusively on either of the normative functions (Leech, 1983) or the instrumental functions (Brown & Levinson, 1987) of self-deprecation, it is argued that these two lines of inquiry cannot be separated from each other if the social, cultural and historical contexts are considered. Put another way, self-deprecation is best treated as a construct responsive to social sanctions, psychological needs and communicative goals.

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The Chinese concept of face is reexamined within this framework, and an alternative interpretation is proposed to make the universal model of face (Goffman, 1967/1999; Brown & Levinson, 1987) more compatible with the language and cultural-specific characteristics of Chinese.

The ritual implications of self-deprecation are rooted in Chinese traditional ethics that favored sociality over individuality. As individuals were conceived to be shaped by a matrix of social, cultural and psychological complications, the concept of self in Chinese culture was cast as an image of interdependent self lodged in social networks wherein the values, beliefs, and interests needed to be acquired and mediated along the contact between individuals and social institutions. Because of the predominance of hierarchism and patriarchalism in feudalistic China, self-deprecation was rubricated, among other norms, as one of the crucial moral principles and as the essence of etiquette, thereby forming the nucleus of politeness.

The doctrines related to self-deprecation had been documented in such classical philosophical works as The Analects of Confucius and The Book of Rites (Li Chi). Confucius, the ancient Chinese philosopher and educator, advocated fervently the practice of self-abasement. His unparalleled erudition and farsightedness notwithstanding, he depreciated his knowledge and expertise by claiming that his contributions to education were no more than the transmission of the knowledge and skills he had learned from his teachers to his disciples without "making up anything of his own" (Confucius, 1938: 123). In a similar vein, The Book of Rites informed us that self-deprecation occurred both in social spheres and in familial domains. The lower ranked were obliged to use honorifics in

addressing the higher ranked while they had to adopt deprecatory forms in designating themselves. For instance, the county magistrate needed to call the governor of the province as *da4ren*[1] (lord), yet referred himself as *bei1zhi2* (menial official). The wife of the duke had to call herself "*lao3fu1*" (an old biddy) before the emperor (Li Chi, 1967, p. 34). When talking with his husband, she should use the term "*xiao3tong2*" (the little maid) as the proper form of self-designation (Li Chi, 1967, p. 34).

Although self-deprecation is indicative of power relationships among interactants, it is not necessarily incompatible with solidarity relationships whereby participants enjoy equal status and advantage. In this case, it is more out of the need to maintain and expand good interpersonal relationships than out of ethical obligations that both sides utilize self-deprecatory terms. This phenomenon attests to the dual implications of politeness in Chinese culture. As a "diplomatic protocol" (Brown & Levinson 1987, p. 1), politeness neutralizes the perceived and potential conflicts that might emerge from interaction, and establishes territorial boundaries for each interlocutor. On the other hand, politeness is part of the moral and behavioral norms that an individual, as a social being, needs to observe. Oftentimes, being politeness or not becomes the criterion to differentiate the well-educated from the less well-educated. Instead of being separate from each other, the instrumental and normative implications of politeness anchor on the two ends of a continuum, and create a variety of options for participants to choose from in interpersonal transaction.

Self-deprecation is closely linked to other-elevation in both means and ends. The denigration of self provides an alternative to compliments, and creates disequilibrium in social and/or economic status that favors the addressee. Because self-deprecation is subject

to an other-oriented rule, communicators are supposed to use derogatory expressions in alluding to someone else on their side, who may deserve honorific forms of address in other contexts, when conversing with other participants. Therefore, self-deprecation can be extended to individuals that have kinship relationships with the speaker or are considered belonging to the same social or ethnic group. This accounts for the reason why a wife would utilize seemingly disrespectful terms such as *zhuo3fu1* (silly husband) when referring his husband to someone else. By the same token, the term "*bi4you3*" (my humble friend(s)) instead of "*gao1peng2*" (your great friend(s)) can be legitimately used to introduce one's close friends to others.

Self-deprecation does not only occur in speech events, but in literacy events as well. The lexicalization of self-deprecatory terms has been extended far beyond the scope of the form of address so as to cover such various facets of social life as occupation, property, academia, and business transaction. Typically, there is an honorific term corresponding to the self-denigrative counterpart and forms pairs of antonym, such as *xiao3ke3* (servant) versus *zu2xia4* (the respectable), and *diao1chong2qiao3ji4* (insignificant skills) versus *zao4yi4jing1shen1* (expert).

The pragmatic implications of self-deprecation lie mainly in three respects: avoidance of face threats, elicitation of sympathy, and self-defense. The concept of face, which springs from oriental cultures, has been defined as an image that an individual delineates in terms of accepted social attributes (Goffman, 1967/1999). Although the preservation of face does not serve as the ultimate goal of communication, it nonetheless "counteracts incidents" that might violate the "traffic rules" in verbal games. (Goffman,

1967/1999, p. 309). According to Brown & Levinson (1987), face threats derive mainly from two sources: one that jeopardizes the positive face and the other that endangers the negative face. Criticism, disagreement, and disapproval that frustrate a person's desire to be esteemed by others are the candidates of the first category while many indirect speech acts like invitation, compliment, and request that do not live up to the interlocutor's expectation to stay away from imposition fall into the latter category. They entertain that the degree of face threats to be compensated for is dependent upon the interaction among the social and psychological distance (D), the status of power (P), and the amount of imposition (I) among participants. Since D, P. and I are socio-psychologically constructed in a given situational context, face-work needs to be manipulated by interactive variables that mediate the dynamics of D, P. and I in the negotiation of politeness. Self-deprecation is such a variable. Given its pivotal role in Chinese politeness (Gu, 1990), self-deprecation can be posited as the denominator that divides the face threats which consist of the sum of D, P and I^2, as illustrated in the following formula I propose.

Politeness =Face threats/Self-deprecation

=(Distance+Power+Imposition)/Self-deprecation

The concern of the measurement of face threats leads us to the examination of the concept of face in the Chinese cultural context. Although Brown & Levinson's (1987) face-threatening model is powerful in illuminating the universals of communication, it seems to fall short of accommodating particular characteristics unique in a certain speech community. What is even more problematic about their model is that politeness is often at stake of face-threatening acts so that face needs to be constantly redressed. In light of

Brown & Levinson's speculation, take compliments for instance, the addresser may be conceived of bearing the intention to possess what the addressee owns and, therefore, poses threats to the negative face of the addressee. If the addressee devalues his or her possession to combat the addresser's envy. In this way, his or her positive face is inevitably endangered (Mao, 1994). Such a cost-sensitive and egocentric view of communication has provoked researchers into interrogating the underlying assumptions of the model and constructing a more balanced perspective of face that better reflects the sociocultural features of the China's society.

Gu (1990), among others, pointed out that the Chinese perceive face threats in a markedly different lens from the westerners especially in terms of the negative face. He argued that an indirect speech act like invitation would put in peril the inviter's positive face in lieu of the invitee's negative face as discussed in Brown & Levinson (1987) in that it is the inviter who needs to honor the promise. Mao (1994) elaborated the impact of interactional orientation on face-work. It can be inferred from his discussion that if the interactional intention is oriented toward the gaining of an ideal social identity, face threats take the form of perceived offense. In contrast, when the interactional intention is geared toward the claiming of individual autonomy, face threats are shifted to the offers would result in dependence on others. Building on these discussions, an alternative interpretation of Chinese face is formulated. The motif of the Chinese face is the balance between the individual's claim of rights from society and their corresponding commitments to society. To be specific, the Chinese positive face is concerned with the individual's aspiration to gain social acknowledgement of one's reputation and achievements, while the Chinese

negative face denotes the individual's inclination to be independent and free from indebtedness to others.

The elicitation of sympathy is realized through the addresser's voluntary share of personal vulnerability with the addressee. As shown in my tape-recordings of 48 authentic daily conversations carried by native speakers of China, denigrating one's own capacity or contributions would increase the possibilities of rallying immediate support that expedites the fulfillment of communicative goals. This seems to hold true for issuing a request and making an apology. Instances of request-related verbal interaction signify that interlocutors were able to draw maximum benefits by stressing their incompetence in undertaking a particular task that appears extraordinarily arduous, yet crucially important and urgent. As regards apology, interlocutors who resorted to self-abusive language rather than to evasive explanations had more chance to earn the forgiveness of the offended.

Self-deprecation serves also as a self-defensive strategy. Goffman (1967/1999) noted that showing modesty anticipates others' praise and the audience should accordingly give credit to the speaker's politeness. By this logic, self-deprecation is an indirect strategy oriented to eschew criticism and safeguard the sacred self, which Hu (1944) termed as "*lian3*" "represent(ing) the confidence of society in the integrity of ego's moral character" (p. 45). She suggested that this very moral construct encodes the "internalized sanction" of accepted moral standards and sings a different tune from the notion of face that is "on loan to individuals from society" (Mao, 1994, p. 453). Following this line of reasoning, "*lian3*" could be considered as "meta-face" embedded in an individual's character, and constitutes part of one's dignity. It establishes the zone of face-work that delimits self-deprecation and

prevents the intrusion of insult. Hence, what is actually involved in face-work transaction, in Hu's opinion, is "*mian4zi*", a counterpart of the western version of face, instead of "*lian3*". My data sources further suggested that once a twist made in response to self-deprecation was judged as insulting self-elevation would rise to the occasion to rescue the threatened face.

The inquiry into the self-deprecation phenomena in Chinese face-work does not only bring insights into the normative and instrumental roles of politeness in social interaction, but also helps gain a better understanding of the importance of face in learning and instruction, especially at adolescent and adult levels. Rivers (1983) suggested that successful interaction in foreign language classrooms "calls for the self-restraint and tact on the part of the teacher" (p. ix). Seen in this light, face-work, if properly mobilized, can foster teacher-student rapport and aid learners to build confidence in themselves as thinkers and inquirers.

Footnotes:

1. The number following the phonetic symbols illustrates the tones each syllable is pronounced. When the number is absent, the sound of the syllable is treated as weak.

2. Grundy (1995) introduced the following formula to illuminate the relationships between the three variables, D, P, and I, and the degree of face threats.

Distance + Power + Imposition = Degree of face threat to be compensate for

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